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Naming the Plague in Homer, Sophocles and Thucydides

Abstract: This article focuses on the language used to describe the plague, and more specifically on the oscillation of its vocabulary between literal and figurative meaning, in Homer's *Iliad* (1.1-487), Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (1-215), and Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (esp. 2.47.3-2.54). It is argued that the plague spreads in the language of the three narratives by association or contiguity, exploiting existing links with related words, most notably the broader vocabulary of disease and calamity, but it also spreads by analogy, comparison, or similarity, establishing links with other domains such as famine, blight, war and destruction.

The Greek word for the plague, λοιμός, is relatively absent from the surviving texts of the archaic and classical periods. It is used once in Homer, once in Hesiod, three times in tragedy and in Herodotus, four times in Thucydides and Plato, and once in Demosthenes and Aeschines.¹ Robin Mitchell-Boyask may well be right that superstition plays a role in this, especially for the period following the great plague of Athens of the early 420s.² In the context of this article, however, I am more interested in the broader consequences of the phenomenon and in the possibilities it opens up for how the plague can be transmitted in poetic and historical narrative. If the plague is identified through other words and phrases that shift within and across a wide range of registers and blur the distinction between the literal and the figurative, such associations exemplify something fundamental about how pestilence spreads linguistically: it spreads not by maintaining an essence and an identity (be it biological, metaphysical, cognitive, or semantic) but through a dynamic process based on the exploitation of its linguistic hosts and on its own ability to adapt. It spreads by association or contiguity,

exploiting existing links with related words (most notably the broader vocabulary for disease and calamity), but it also spreads by analogy, comparison or similarity, establishing links between different and distinct domains (from famine to blight, war, and destruction). In what follows I show how the three earliest, and arguably most influential, representations of the plague in Western narrative, Homer's *Iliad 1*, the opening scenes of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and the digression on the Athenian plague in Thucydides' book 2, revisit and reorganize a complex set of semantic, syntactical, and grammatical interconnections around the phenomenon of the plague, conceptualizing its power not only to disrupt order but also to exploit the reader's desire for synthesis and meaning.³

Loimos is a phenomenon which attacks indiscriminately, both within human communities and across different forms of animal and plant life around human communities. The Greeks found it at once very powerful in its devastating effects but also hard to understand because it cannot be directly observed. While the broader question of the place of the plague in Greek imagination requires a more detailed analysis than the one that can be undertaken in the context of this (or any) article,⁴ the discussion that follows makes a case for the significance of exploring the plague as a *literary* phenomenon. The article focuses on how the plague is communicated through language, how it relies on the association of different ideas and words, how it acquires meaning through contact with other domains and linguistic word-play, and how it reflects the ability of the plague itself to overwhelm and at the same time to lie outside of human intelligibility. The discussion moves away from the policing of the boundaries between the literal and the figurative in discourses associated with the history of medicine.⁵ It also moves away from the more prescriptive (and often inconsistent) distinctions between normal and deviant usage of words in ancient

rhetorical theories of tropes.⁶ Drawing on cognitive linguistics and continental critical thought,⁷ as well as on the rise of language *as* contagion in modern popular thought and critical discourse,⁸ the article is less interested in categorical and hierarchical distinctions between different types of figurative language (and their changing fortunes from ancient rhetoric to structural semiotics⁹) and more in the basic mechanisms through which such types of language become central to how the plague spreads in narrative. The plague creates narratives where crisis and disorder manifest themselves through reversals at the level of grammatical, syntactical, and semantic operations. Human beings, normally agents of action and grammatical subjects in control of verbal activity, become objects pulled into spheres of action outside their control. The plague claims the grammatical subject position and asserts its power through verbs that allow it to attach itself to other domains. What is more, both the subject positions and the verbal actions associated with the plague rely on borrowed vocabulary: they are based on analogy and displacement.

Personification

As early as the first *Against Aristogeiton* speech attributed to Demosthenes (and probably dated around 335-325BCE), *loimos* is used as a “metaphor” to speak of a pernicious person,¹⁰ with the speaker asking the jury to convict “the scapegoat, the plague” (ὁ φαρμακός, ὁ λοιμός, 25.80). The argument that a man’s unjust actions offend the gods and do his community harm that can manifest itself as the outbreak of a plague can be traced all the way back to Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, 240-245. This Hesiodic passage is quoted by another fourth-century orator, Aeschines, in *Against Ctesiphon* (3.135) to depict Demosthenes himself and his politics “as destructive to the political health of Athens,”¹¹ in response to a claim by Demosthenes in *On the False Embassy*

(19.259), that a “terrible epidemic has fallen over Greece” (νόσημα ... δεινὸν ἐμπέτωκεν εἰς τὴν Ἑλλάδα). When the speaker of *Against Aristogeiton* accuses his opponent as “the plague,” then, this has all the seriousness of an accusation of pollution, but it also shows the ease with which religious language is activated in fourth-century speeches in public trials.¹² To assess how bold is such a metaphor (and its combination with scapegoating), we need to consider not only “the tendency ... in fifth-century writers to avoid the word *loimos*,”¹³ but also the complexities around the personification of the plague in earlier literature. What does the plague look like before the (real or imagined) law courts of the fourth century?

For the purposes of this discussion, personification is a subcategory of metaphor, rather than a master trope of poetic discourse with primacy over metaphor and irony.¹⁴ To avoid the “conceptual confusion about [the] status and value” of personification, with its associations with the concepts of person and personality, we might revert to the term *prosopopeia*, the making of a face or mask, rather than of a person.¹⁵ The plague does not have a face (instead of a mask, or behind the mask), but the sense of artistic craftsmanship that the word *prosopopeia* entails is certainly relevant. As Jane Hedley argues, “*prosopopeia* is the trope of *energeia*.”¹⁶ It animates, setting in motion different actions and characteristics. In the case of the plague, the actions and characteristics of *prosopopeia* have to do with hostile, non-human agency. As it is argued below, they must be seen as a process of deification (agency of a hostile god or daemon), animification (agency of a predatory animal), and reification (agency of inanimate forces such as natural elements or weapons). They can even, perhaps, be linked to a process of anthropomorphism (if to be defeated by the plague comes with associations of a duel or an athletic competition, as we will also see below). Personification helps map the plague onto the distinct ontological categories of the

divine, animal, and inanimate in their opposition to the human. It also shows how such domains can blur into one another and overlap. In what follows, the plague is explored through the proliferation of what the medieval scholar Jim Paxson calls “micronarratives” of personification.¹⁷ The cumulative effect of those micronarratives is not the disruption of the overall narrative by seductive ornamentation and cosmetic concealment.¹⁸ Rather, it is the very constitution of narrative as the interweaving of different acts of destruction. To think of the personification of the plague is to bridge the “localized animate metaphors and the cognitive generalization that all linguistic activity involves.”¹⁹

Adam Parry notes in connection to Thucydides’ vocabulary that “[t]he verb *struck* is ἐγκατασκῆψαι [2.47.3], the first appearance of it in a prose writer, and it is not in the medical corpus. Sophocles uses it, and before him, Aeschylus [...]. Thucydides frequently puts his metaphors into verbs, and the suppressed image here, of a thunderbolt, is the same as what appears in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*.”²⁰ This is by no means the only metaphor in Thucydides’ description of the plague. If we follow Parry’s suggestion to look for Thucydides’ predicative metaphors, we will find numerous other examples across his narrative of the plague. The plague descends on lower lands and on lower regions of the human body (κατέβη, 2.48.1; ἐπικατιόντος, 2.49.6), but it also ascends (ἐς τὴν ἄνω πόλιν ἀφίκετο, 2.48.2). It violently falls into cities and upon people (ἐνέπεσε, 2.48.2; ἐπιπέσοι, 2.48.3; προσέπιπτεν, 2.50.1, ἐπέπεσε, 3.87.1), it fastens itself to its victims (ἥψατο, 2.48.2), it “is settled” (ἰδρυθὲν, 2.49.7), it “strikes” or “falls upon” places like lightning (ἐγκατασκῆψαι, repeated twice in 2.47.3) and on limbs “like a divine visitation” (κατέσκηπτε, 2.49.8), it takes limbs away (στερισκόμενοι τούτων διέφευγον, 2.49.8)²¹ leaving its violent marks on the body of the victim (τῶν ἀκρωτηρίων ἀντίληψις αὐτοῦ ἐπεσήμαινεν, 2.49.7), it “spreads/sweeps” in

the way fire does (ἐπενείματο, 2.54.5), it “seizes all alike” (πάντα ξυνήρει, 2.51.3), it “destroys” (φθείρασα, 1.23.3; φθορά, 2.47.3; φθόρον, 2.51.4; διαφθαρήναι, 2.51.6; φθόρος, 2.52.2; ἔφθειρε, 2.57.1; φθείρουσα, 2.58.2; τῇ νόσῳ ἀπολέσας, 2.58.3; νόσῳ τε γὰρ ἐφθάρηται, 3.13.3; ἐκάκωσε 3.87.2),²² it “presses upon” in the way the war does (ἡ νόσος ἐπέκειτο ἅμα καὶ ὁ πόλεμος, 2.59.1), it “presses exceedingly heavily” (ὕπερβιαζομένου, 2.52.3; cf. ἐπίεσε, 3.87.2), it is a death sentence pronounced against the Athenians (κατεψηφισμένην, 2.53.4) hanging over their heads like a rock (ἐπικρεμασθῆναι, 2.53.4), a substance with which its victims are filled full (ἕτερος ἀφ’ ἐτέρου ... ἀναπιμπλάμενοι, 2.51.4), a victorious warrior or athlete (ὕπὸ τοῦ πολλοῦ κακοῦ νικώμενοι, 2.51.5) whose victims die like the sheep (ὥσπερ τὰ πρόβατα ἔθνησκον, 2.51.4). In Thucydides, then, the plague has associations with the demonic (divine visitation), with birds of prey (falling upon, fastening itself to victims), with elemental forces (lightning, fire, rock), and with inanimate/material objects (applying pressure and causing marks on bodies; traveling through the routes of flux and settling in ways that cause blockage²³). When Thucydides’ Pericles associates the plague with “what comes from the gods” (τά ... δαιμόνια, 2.64.2), this does not have to be seen as metaphorical. If the violence of demons can be presented as a commonplace idea in Hippocratic writings (even if not convincing to rationalist healers),²⁴ then there is no reason why such references, suggested by some of the vocabulary mentioned above, cannot also come across as persuasive in the rhetorical context of Pericles’ speech.²⁵ But, as the many verbs used in Thucydides’ own description of the plague demonstrate, the vocabulary of hostile, non-human agency that his narrative activates is much more diverse than Pericles’ language suggests.

In Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, the description of the plague is also characterized by excess, with the proliferation of images of hostile agency and

movement having the double effect of displaying and mystifying its power. This is achieved through the boldness and cumulative effect of a series of loosely connected images, in which the boundaries between the literal, the metaphorical, and the metonymic blur. The ordering principle may be different from Thucydides' ("adorning and amplification" as opposed to inferential data in linear sequence, if we follow the opposition set up by Thucydides himself between the poets and his own method in 1.21.1²⁶), but the effect is similar. The plague is likened to the elemental forces of the storm (ἄγαν / ... σαλεύει, 22-23) and the rough sea that is further metaphorized as "killing angry" (βυθῶν ... φοινίου σάλου, 24). It is described as a disease spreading across species: among plants, flocks, and pregnant women (φθίνουσα μὲν κάλυξιν ἐγκάρποις χθονός, / φθίνουσα δ' ἀγέλαις βουνόμοις, τόκοις τε / ἀγόνις γυναικῶν, 25-27). It is depicted as a hostile force persecuting the human population ("a most hateful plague persecutes the city"²⁷ ἐλαύνει, λοιμὸς ἔχθιστος, πόλιν, 27-30). It is visualized as an unidentified firebearing god (ὁ πυρφόρος θεός, 27; identified as Ares only later, in 192 – on which more under "Analogy" below). It is described through fever as the symptom of disease (27, with fire to refer to fever). It is presented in monetary terms when facilitating Hades to get rich (in groans and weeping: Ἄιδης στεναγμοῖς καὶ γόοις πλουτίζεται, 30). Similarly in the entrance song of the Chorus, the plague is compared to previous destruction that loomed over the city (ἄτας, 165) and to flames of ruin (φλόγα, 166), it is described as a disease on all people (νοσεῖ δέ μοι πρόπας / στόλος, 169-70), it is associated with lack of increase of the fruits (οὔτε γὰρ ἔκγονα / κλυτὰς χθονὸς αὖξεται, 171-2) and with still births/miscarriages (οὔτε τόκοισιν / ἡϊῶν καμάτων ἀνέχουσι γυναῖκες, 173-4), it is presented as "worse than irresistible fire"²⁸ (κρεῖσσον ἀμαιμακέτου πυρὸς, 176) and as Ares scorching (φλέγει, 192), attacking with cries of war (περιβόητος, 192), and without the need for defensive weapons

(ἄχαλκος ἀσπίδων, 191²⁹). As in Thucydides, the plague of *Oedipus the King* is an amalgamation of various types of hostile, non-human agency: divine interventions (fire-bringing god, god of war), elemental forces (fire, storm, rough sea), weapons (fire, cries of war), monsters (the Sphinx), and diseases of various kinds.

In the opening book of the *Iliad*, the agency of the plague is the agency of a hostile god. At first glance, there are only striking differences between the multiplicity of micronarratives of supernatural force evoked in Sophocles and Thucydides, which mostly (though not exclusively) relate to what Ruth Padel calls the “aerial assailants” of Greek thought such as birds of prey, winged, part-animal daemons, and natural elements,³⁰ and the seemingly more coherent description in the *Iliad* of the arrival of an angry Apollo with deadly arrows. But even in the *Iliad*, the agency of the plague is the result of the clustering of a number of different domains. For instance, the cause of the plague has to do with embodied emotions, whereas the manner in which the plague is inflicted has to do with military weapons. How affective regimes and military technologies relate to the plague requires an in-depth discussion that lies outside the scope of this article (though I return briefly to the issue of archery and the plague under “Analogy” below). There are two other aspects of the vocabulary of the Iliadic plague that should be discussed here. The first has to do with the verbs used to describe how the plague manifests itself. At least one ancient reader of Homer, the third-century BCE grammarian Zenodotus, thought that the plague has heavy hands that only Apollo can keep back, reading in line 97 “will not keep back the heavy hands of plague” (λοιμοῖο βαρείας χεῖρας ἀφέξει) over “will drive off from the Danaans loathsome destruction” (Δαναοῖσιν ἀεικέα λοιγὸν ἀπώσει).³¹ In the rest of Homer’s narrative, however, the domains with which the plague shares its power need to be deduced from verbal actions, rather than being explicit in nouns. The plague of *Iliad I* does not have a body or gender,

but it is called forth/stirred up and advances horizontally in the way storms, waves, and fire do (νοῦσον ἀνὰ στρατὸν ὥρσε, 10);³² Apollo’s deadly arrows go through the army in the way persons do (ἀνὰ στρατὸν ὄχετο κῆλα θεοῖο, 53; ὄχετο - “the arrows are personified” says Thomas Seymour³³); and Apollo himself “goes over and towards” animals (οὐρῆας ... ἐπώχετο καὶ κύνας, 50) in the way his arrows do later.³⁴ The only comparison that the text flags up is that of Apollo arriving like the night (ὁ δ’ ἦε νυκτὶ εἰκώς, 47). The first book of the *Iliad* may be “the only book with none of the extended similes for which Homer is justly renowned,”³⁵ but the brief simile of Apollo descending like the night offers a good example of how similes assert similarities between conceptual domains which are dissimilar,³⁶ and in doing so present how the gods travel between distinct spatial domains.³⁷ Apollo’s divine identity is asserted through the speed, appearance, and purpose derived from his likeness to the night: he is swift, invisible, deadly. This is a simile whose “chilling power”³⁸ is due partly to the associations of night with eeriness, danger, and death,³⁹ partly to the swiftness, silence, invisibility, and inevitability of night’s descent, and partly to the brevity of the simile itself (“as brief as possible” says Simon Pulleyn⁴⁰) which enacts at the level of form the swiftness and decisiveness with which night descends.⁴¹

Metonymy

Metonymy mobilizes and exploits pre-existing links between adjacent concepts. Normally, the effects created by metonymic shifts are rather “subtle,” as Sebastian Matzner puts it in his recent study of the trope.⁴² This is because metonymy, unlike metaphor, does not prioritize the creation of new meanings. However, metonymic shifts can also be used to undermine or otherwise modify pre-existing similarities between domains, and in such cases their effects can be “significant.”⁴³ This section explores

two such shifts. First, it explores the replacement of the more specific word for “plague,” λοιμός, by the more general words for “disease,” νόσος, and “misfortune,” κακόν. What matters here is how the conceptual proximity between part and whole allows not only the substitution of the part by the whole, as one noun replaces another, but also the hijacking of the whole by the part, as characteristics specific to the part rub off on the whole and characteristics specific to the whole are put to the service of the part. Another concept to be discussed in this section has to do with unpredictability as a historical force in Thucydides. Here, metonymy can be used to explore not how the particular takes over the general but how the particular can help generate the general.

In all three narratives examined in this article, a specific outbreak of plague breaks out of the domain of “plague” (λοιμός) and claims for itself a central position within the more general domain of “disease” (νόσος). The plague is often identified as “the disease” (ἡ νόσος). But to claim that “*loimos* and *nosos* are completely interchangeable,” as it has been argued in relation to Thucydides,⁴⁴ is to obscure the workings and effects of the interplay between the two words. In the *Iliad*, the plague is introduced proleptically only as *nosos* (νοῦσον, 10), but it is immediately qualified as an epidemic through the magnitude of its impact (κακήν, “evil,” 10), its spreading across the army (ἄνὰ στρατὸν, “throughout the army,” 10), and its duration (ὀλέκοντο, “were perishing,” 11). The word λοιμός is not used until line 60, long after its devastating effects have been thoroughly established, as a way of recapitulating the theme of the opening scene of the poem. In the opening scene of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* the word for plague is also introduced late, in line 28, where we hear of λοιμός ἔχθιστος, “most abominable plague.”⁴⁵ Here, the clues about the nature of the disease provided in the preceding lines are much less specific than in the opening of the *Iliad*. As a result, we have a climactic build up to this moment, when the nature of the disease

is disclosed, rather than a recapitulation. In the rest of Sophocles' play, references to the plague mix with references to spilled blood as its cause (μίασμα, 97; αἷμα, 101; μύσος, 138; μιάσματος, 241; μίασμα, 313; μιάστορι, 353; ἀγηλατήσιν, 402, χραίνω, 822; μίασμα, 1012; κηλῖδα, 1384; ἀνδρὸς ἀθλίου θιγεῖν, 1413; ἄγος, 1426) and give way to the generic vocabulary of "disease." This vocabulary, initially introduced as having physical, psychological, and political associations (60-64: νοσεῖτε ... νοσοῦντες ... νοσεῖ), oscillates between specific references to the plague (as in νόσου, 149; νοσεῖ, 169; νόσῳ, 217; νόσῳ, 303) and less specific references to disease (νοσήματος, 307; νοσοῦσης, 636; νόσου, 960, νόσοις, 962; νοσοῦσ', 1061; νόσημα, 1293; νόσον, 1455). This facilitates the transition from the focus on the plague in the opening scenes of the play to the broader vocabulary of pollution and purification that dominates as the focus shifts away from the city towards the protagonist as an individual.⁴⁶ At the same time, however, it also allows the plague to leave its marks on the semantic associations of the broader category of disease in ways that remain relevant until the end of the play – for instance when the "sick" Oedipus (νόσημα, 1293) asks to be driven out of the city (ἐκτόπιον, 1340) in the way the Chorus had earlier appealed for the plague to be driven out of the city (ἐκτοπίαν, 166).

In Thucydides' discussion of the plague in book 2, the plague is identified as "the disease" (ἡ νόσος, 2.47.3) from the beginning ("abruptly mentioned at the outset," as Rosaria Munson puts it⁴⁷) and remains so throughout the digression, as indeed it does when it is mentioned again in books 3 and 6 (ἡ νόσος, 2.49.6; τὸ εἶδος τῆς νόσου, 2.50.1; ἡ νόσος, τὴν νόσον, 2.54.4; ἡ νόσος, 2.57.1; 2.59.1; τὴν νόσον, 2.61.3; ἡ νόσος, 3.87.1; τῆς νόσου, 6.26.2). As in Plato's *Symposium*, where "the disease" (τῆς νόσου, 201d4) refers specifically to the historical plague of Thucydides' narrative, what we have here is a taxonomic differentiation achieved exclusively through syntax. The

semantic hijacking of the word νόσος is achieved, in a very elementary manner, with the attachment of the definite article to the noun. “The disease” is made to mean “epidemic disease” and more specifically “a historically specific occurrence of epidemic disease,” in a manner that gains “the advantages of both the general and the concrete at the same time without sacrificing one for the other.”⁴⁸ The definite article can be seen as performing a double displacement or substitution. First, it reduces the pressure on the narrator to commit himself to a linguistic definition of what he is referring to, shifting the focus from the here and now of the narrative to what comes before (anaphora), what comes after (prolepsis), and what lies beyond the narrative/discourse, in the world of the narrator and the reader (deixis). Second, it transfers the search and responsibility for meaning from the narrator to the reader who is invited “to find the referent in the environment, without however directing his attention to any particular region of it,”⁴⁹ and who is therefore expected to consider both perceptual and cognitive factors. That Thucydides’ narrator does that at the very beginning of his long description of the plague may suggest a proleptic use of the definite article, but I think it is equally plausible to assume that the definite article is used here to set the narrative about to begin against the false familiarity with the plague implied in the article if understood as ‘particular’ (the plague that everyone knows about).⁵⁰

If metonymy is a choice of level of specificity, the substitution of λοιμός by ἡ νόσος results into something which is at once more general and more specific. Pericles returns to the plague with a gestural indication (ἡ νόσος ἥδε, 2.64.1) that allows him to proceed with the claim that it was really exceptional (“the only thing which has happened that has transcended our foresight” πράγμα μόνον δὴ τῶν πάντων ἐλπίδος κρεῖσσον γεγεννημένον, 2.64.1; cf. Nicias’s “we have but lately recovered somewhat”

νεωστὶ ... βραχύ τι λελωφήκαμεν, 6.12.1). The exceptional nature of the plague does not only hijack the general category of νόσος with its broader associations. It also marginalizes the word λοιμός which is used for other, less unique and impactful epidemics (“no pestilence of such extent nor any scourge so destructive of human lives is on record anywhere” οὐ μέντοι τοσοῦτός γε λοιμός οὐδὲ φθορὰ οὕτως ἀνθρώπων οὐδαμοῦ ἐμνημονεύετο γενέσθαι, 2.47.3-4) or for the meaninglessness of linguistic debates about oracles, popular beliefs, and collective memory (λοιμός ... λοιμὸν ... λοιμὸν, 2.54.3) – on which more below. An epidemic outbreak like no other can no longer exemplify the general category of “epidemic disease.” It breaks out of the confines of that category and claims for itself the name of the even broader category of “disease” and the rich web of associations with physical, mental, and moral issues that category has.

In Thucydides, the plague is an all-encompassing disease that pushes and redefines the boundaries of what disease is. It is different from any of the familiar diseases (ἄλλο τι ὄν ἢ τῶν ξυντρόφων τι, 2.50.1). It stands over and above one’s ability to describe, explain, and predict (κρεῖσσον λόγου, 2.50.1). It is also disproportionately powerful for human nature (χαλεπωτέως ἢ κατὰ τὴν ἀνθρωπείαν φύσιν, 2.50.1). The unusual superiority of the plague over domains such as reason, language, predictability, and human nature, and its alien character compared to ordinary diseases, bring about what Thucydides sums up as “such a great upheaval” (τοσαύτης μεταβολῆς, 2.48.3). A number of factors account for its special nature. First, in marked contrast to the explanatory model for epidemic diseases favoured by physicians, it crosses different species (birds, dogs, humans, 2.50.2).⁵¹ Second, it has numerous and variant symptoms (e.g. “it chanced to affect one man differently as compared with another,” ὥς ἐκάστῳ ἐτύγχανέ τι διαφερόντως ἐτέρῳ πρὸς ἕτερον γιγνόμενον, 2.51.1), and no remedy works

on all patients (ἐν τε οὐδὲν κατέστη ἴαμα, 2.51.2).⁵² Third, it is what all other diseases end up to (“it ended in this” ἐς τοῦτο ἐτελεύτα, 2.51.2), following a process of transformation (“all changed into this” ἐς τοῦτο πάντα ἀπεκρίθη, 2.49.1-2⁵³). Fourth, its casualties outnumber those of “any” military conflict (“nothing was more exhausting or ruinous” μὴ εἶναι ὅ τι μᾶλλον τούτου ἐπίεσε καὶ ἐκάκωσε, 3.87.2).⁵⁴ Finally, its impact is not only biological but more broadly social and political (as the focus of 2.51-53 demonstrates).

There is only one passage in Thucydides where νόσος coexists with, and is qualified by, an adjectival form of λοιμός. That is the discussion of the causes of the Peloponnesian War near the end of his preface in 1.23, where the plague is introduced for the very first time in the narrative and where it is presented as “the pestilential disease” (ἡ λοιμώδης νόσος, 1.23.3). The phrase can be seen as “descriptive”⁵⁵ (i.e. a disease of the pestilential type) and technical (as in Hippocrates’ “type of pestilential disease” λοιμώδεος νούσου τρόπος⁵⁶). However, the phrase is also “stronger than λοιμός,” as John Owen notes.⁵⁷ What makes it marked is not only the fact that it is a periphrasis where the single noun λοιμός would be expected to follow on from λιμοὶ καὶ ... (“famines and...”) as they habitually appear together (as discussed under “Near-homonymy” below). The syntactic disruption of the hyperbaton that prepares for and draws attention to this periphrasis (literally: “the not least pernicious and in part utterly destructive, the pestilential disease” ἡ οὐχ ἥκιστα βλάψασα καὶ μέρος τι φθείρασα ἡ λοιμώδης νόσος) plays an important role in what Parry calls the “unique and almost apocalyptic language” of this passage.⁵⁸ And, once again, the definite article, this time repeated due to the intervening words (ἡ ... ἡ), sets this particular instance of pestilential disease apart from all others and helps explain why in this passage on the causes of the war it appears as “the climax of the sufferings and disasters listed.”⁵⁹

Another broad concept through which the plague makes itself manifest is that of “calamity” (κακόν). “Calamity takes various forms” (τὸ . . . κακὸν πολυειδέες), as Aristotle puts it,⁶⁰ and the plague is a specific subtype of that broader category. However, as is the case with “the disease,” “the calamity” (τὸ κακόν) can also be made to refer specifically to the plague. In Aeschylus’ *Persians*, the plague is the first type of excessive misfortune that Darius’ ghost can think of, the most obvious example of “the depth of misfortunes” (κακῶν . . . βάθος, 712). Similarly, in Herodotus the plague is the first example discussed among the “great ills” that threaten cities or nations (μεγάλα κακὰ, 6.27). In *Oedipus the King*, too, the Sphinx, whose hostile agency and impact closely resemble the plague, is presented as the one evil (κακὸν δὲ ποῖον, 128) that more than any other (ἐν κακοῖς, 127) prevents the Thebans from finding the murderer of Laius in the aftermath of his killing. When the word κακῶν reappears in 218, in a passage where Oedipus promises to apply treatment to “the sickness” (τῇ νόσῳ, 217) suffered by the Thebans, it refers not to one type of calamity but to all the different types of calamity under the plague against which the Thebans need a defence and from which they ask for relief. Here, the plague is not one manifestation of calamity among others, nor is it the worst of all calamities, but an overarching context and condition for calamity. The same applies to the earlier mention of the “countless troubles” that the Chorus is claiming to be suffering (ἀνάρηθμα . . . / πῆματα, 168-69) and to the subsequent “sense of being at a loss because of toils” previously experienced because of the Sphinx and now again because of the plague (ἐν πόνοις / ἀλύουσιν, 694-97) – in what is the last direct reference to the plague in the play.⁶¹

In the *Iliad* too, the associations of the specific take over the meaning of the general. Κακόν is an adjective that under the influence of the plague is used both for the disease itself and for Apollo’s arrows through which the disease spreads (νοῦσον

... κακήν, “evil disease,” 10-11; κακὸν βέλος, “evil arrow,” 382). As an adjective qualifying both the general category of disease and the specific instruments of divine dispensation of punishment, it comes to mean a very specific type of destruction, a pestilential one. It is in Thucydides, however, more than in Homer or in Sophocles, that the plague is identified as “the calamity” (τὸ κακόν), hijacking not only the linguistic demarcation of “calamity” as a broader category (as for instance in “overcome by the calamity,” ὑπὸ τοῦ κακοῦ νικώμενοι, 2.47.4) but also its multiformity: “the malady, starting from the head where it was first seated” (τὸ ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ πρῶτον ἰδρυθὲν κακόν, 2.49.7); “the most dreadful thing about the whole malady” (δεινότατον δὲ παντὸς ἦν τοῦ κακοῦ, 2.51.4); “overwhelmed by the magnitude of the calamity” (ὑπὸ τοῦ πολλοῦ κακοῦ νικώμενοι, 2.51.5-6). As with the general category of disease, the general category of calamity “lends” to a singular instance of calamity its name as well as its forceful effects and multiform nature.

A final concept to be discussed under metonymy has to do with unpredictability as a historical force. For Thucydides’ Pericles the plague is “the sudden and unexpected and what happens contrary to most calculation” (τὸ αἰφνίδιον καὶ ἀπροσδόκητον καὶ τὸ πλείστῳ παραλόγῳ ξυμβαῖνον, 2.61.3). It is also presented as something demonic, as something sent by the gods (τά ... δαιμόνια, 2.64.2). To reconcile these two seemingly distinct domains with one another and with Thucydides’ own disbelief in both religious and medical modes of explanation of the plague, we need to perform a semantic leap away from the divide between rationality and religion, and indeed away from the domains of affect (where the plague has “a great part,” μέρος τι, according to Pericles’ diagnosis of his fellow-Athenians’ hatred toward him at 2.64.1⁶²) and foresight (with the plague being “the only thing which has happened that has transcended” it, πρᾶγμα μόνον δὴ τῶν πάντων ἐλπίδος κρεῖσσον γεγενημένον, 2.64.1). Scholars such as Robert Connor and

Clifford Orwin have compared Thucydides' depiction of the plague in book 2 with the depiction of civil strife in book 3 (3.70-85), arguing for their similarly compressed language and comparable effects.⁶³ Similarly, Ruth Padel speaks of a "parallel between the plague in book 2 of his History and stasis, 'civil war,' in book 3" which "rests on his [Thucydides'] culture's familiarity with this sort of comparison."⁶⁴ If we follow the logic of their argument, we will conclude that the broader category of which the plague and civil war are different manifestations is the theme of civil society in crisis or the disintegration of political life. While the conceptual affinities between plague and civil war show how Thucydides engages with and further develops a well-established connection between the two,⁶⁵ the logic of Thucydides' Pericles and of the narrator's own claim that the form of the disease was beyond description, expectation, calculation, and/or explanation (κρεῖσσον λόγου τὸ εἶδος τῆς νόσου, 2.50.1)⁶⁶ invites us to take a step further in the direction of abstract deduction. The plague brings about a paradigm shift in the way one thinks about historical change. It is a historically specific event which, although like no other before, is paradigmatic of what might happen again in the future. As such it provides access to a new historiographical concept associated with the incursion into historical reality and into modes of historical explanation of the sudden and the unexpected.⁶⁷ In doing so, it demonstrates how the "essentially metonymic structure of exemplarity" needs to be seen not "as a static, fixed conceptual schema but as a fluid, dynamic, and metonymically organized set of possibilities."⁶⁸ The plague does not simply help perform the crossing from the concrete and historically specific to the abstract. It *generates* that abstraction, enabling epistemological claims about the larger domain of which it becomes part.

Near-homonymy

Near-homonymy, rarely “identified as a linguistic phenomenon in its own right,” is about “words with similar phonemic shapes and, usually, different meanings.”⁶⁹ I am particularly interested in the semantic connections between such words and in the way in which they habitually appear together or replace each other, conveying their meaning by association. Here the proximity is again at the level of nouns, but it is not only semantic, as is the case with the metonymic contiguity between part and whole, but also morphological and syntactic. The words λοιμός (“plague”), λιμός (“famine”), and λοιγός (“destruction”) are near-identical word-forms whose phonic and graphical affinities are not accidental but connected with their semantic similarities. They do not only sound and look similar, but they are all also associated to domains of crisis and destruction.

The words for plague and famine, λοιμός and λιμός, habitually appear together in the “almost proverbial”⁷⁰ λιμός καὶ λοιμός (“famine and plague”) which derives its force by affinities between the words that are simultaneously lexical, collocational, and semantic.⁷¹ The combination of the words must be discussed here primarily for its notable absence from the three narratives under examination. Pestilence and famine often appear together in literature. Their syntactical proximity and semantic affiliations as manifestations of destruction can be traced from Hesiod’s *Works and Days* 243 to Aeschylus’ *Suppliant Women* 659-62 and Herodotus 7.171.2.⁷² They are not necessarily linked causally, nor do they have to be simultaneous temporally, as one might be tempted to assume,⁷³ but their listing together in a proverbial phrase testifies to a mnemonic practice and to a belief that words that sound similar and occur together in language should also be related in meaning. This connection is totally missing in *Iliad* 1, where the plague is associated with war – a more appropriate form of destruction for aristocratic heroes than the Hesiodic theme of famine.⁷⁴ In Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*

it is evoked only indirectly, through blight. In lines 25-27, blight can be seen as part of a “general disease” that affects humans, plants, and flocks alike or as a disease that is complementary to, but distinct from, the plague (spatially and temporally overlapping and causally linked): either way, blight is conducive to famine (φθίνουσα μὲν κάλυξιν ἐγκάρποις χθονός, / φθίνουσα δ’ ἀγέλαις βουνόμοις, τόκοις τε / ἀγόνις γυναικῶν).⁷⁵

The connection between λοιμός and λιμός can be traced with more certainty when Thucydides brings the two concepts in close proximity in 1.23.3 (λιμοὶ καὶ ἡ οὐχ ἥκιστα βλάβη καὶ μέρος τι φθείρασα ἡ λοιμώδης νόσος). Here, however, the habitual link between the two is both evoked and challenged, most notably through the contrast between the plurality of famines and the singularity of the plague and also through the choice of the more marked ἡ λοιμώδης νόσος over the more conventional λοιμός (as discussed under “Metonymy” above). The link between the two words in conventional discourse is revisited even more polemically in 2.54.3 (λοιμὸν ... λιμόν), in the context of an analysis that discredits the authority of religious oracles, collective memory, and popular belief. If in religious discourse and in popular belief λιμός and λοιμός have enough in common for people to be unable to decide which of the two would be more appropriate in the old saying that “A Dorian war shall come and pestilence/famine with it” (“Ἦξει Δωριακὸς πόλεμος καὶ λοιμὸς/λιμὸς ἅμ’ αὐτῷ”), for Thucydides this makes them rhetorically interchangeable and therefore of limited value. It is not only the causal or circumstantial link between λιμός and λοιμός that Thucydides exposes as a linguistic game devoid of ontological substance but also, and arguably more importantly, the causal or circumstantial link between the two concepts and war. For Thucydides, the ease with which λιμός and λοιμός can replace one another does not simply show how the two are interchangeable in an old saying that people remember as it suits them. It also shows how their combination with war amounts to a mere coincidence. For

Thucydides, the free exchange between near-homonyms demonstrates that there is no process of association between either of them and war that can be “founded upon a pre-existing pattern of circumstances and events.”⁷⁶

By contrast to λοιμός and λιμός, the words λοιμός and λοιγός do not appear together in habitual speech. As Gregory Nagy and more elaborately D. R. Blickman have shown, λοιγός is a generic word for destruction and death in the *Iliad* used to describe the effects not only of war but also of the plague (1.67, 1.97, 1.341, 1.398, 1.456).⁷⁷ “Once the advent of the plague is established,” asks Blickman, “is there any significance in the preference shown for describing it as a *loigos* rather than a *nousos* or *loimos*? Or was *loigos* simply the most suitable traditional term available?”⁷⁸ In the *Iliad*, λοιγός comes with specific associations with the slaughter of the Greeks at the ships.⁷⁹ And through the formula “to ward off devastation” (λοιγὸν ἀμῦναι, 1.341, 1.398, 1.456 etc), it is also associated with the urgent need for a solution: “at least in the *Iliad*, the term λοιγός is not called forth simply by death or destruction on a large scale, but by the issue of whether such ruin can be averted or not.”⁸⁰ If the plague belongs to the broader semantic field of “disease” more naturally than to the broader semantic field of “destruction,” the replacement of the word λοιμός by the word λοιγός asserts the affinities between the devastation brought about by the plague and the devastation brought about by war in the rest of the poem. If, then, the formula “to ward off devastation” is “a metonym for the essential story of the *Iliad*,”⁸¹ the poem exploits the near-homonymy of λοιμός and λοιγός to turn the plague into an event of broader significance for the story of the poem. Through its connection with λοιγός, λοιμός does not simply prepare for other types of destruction and pain. It also draws attention to their association with issues of causality and agency, raising the question of who can cause destruction and who has the ability to avert or stop it (thus suggesting a

prospective, if unstable, connection between Apollo and Achilles).⁸² I therefore argue that λοιμός and λοιγός can be seen as a case study for how near-homonymy and metonymy meet at lexical and conceptual crossroads: the replacement of one homonym by another is based on an “effect for cause” metonymy (destruction as an effect of the plague) or on a “whole for part” metonymy (destruction as the general category of which plague is a part). Such a metonymy contributes to the connection between the domains of disease and war while also inviting a causal reading of the *Iliad*’s preoccupation with the agency of destruction.

Analogy

Analogy is a basic philosophical method and a principle underlying figures of speech rather than a literary device as such. However, it is often foregrounded by the narratives themselves as an ordering device that maps knowledge from one domain onto another.⁸³ Focusing on analogy often means to shift away from object descriptions and attributes that different domains share, towards the sharing of a system of relations. In book 10 of the *Laws* (906c-d), Plato establishes an equation between “profiteering or ‘over-gaining’” and “what is called in the case of fleshly bodies ‘disease,’ in that of seasons and years ‘pestilence’ and in that of States and polities ... ‘injustice’” (tr. R. G. Bury; φαμὲν δ’ εἶναι πού τὸ νῦν ὀνομαζόμενον ἀμάρτημα τὴν πλεονεξίαν ἐν μὲν σαρκίνοις σώμασι νόσημα καλούμενον, ἐν δὲ ὥραις ἐτῶν καὶ ἐνιαυτοῖς λοιμόν, ἐν δὲ πόλεσι καὶ πολιτείαις τοῦτο αὐτό, ῥήματι μετεσχηματισμένον, ἀδικίαν). Accounts of the plague in Homer, Sophocles, and Thucydides do not offer such a neat mapping of bodies, seasons, cities, and illnesses of the individual onto pestilence and onto social injustice. But they do make a strong case for thinking about plague and war in ways that bring

together the metonymic, the metaphorical, and the analogical in ways that cannot easily be disentangled.

At the neater end of the spectrum, plague and war appear side by side, with their syntactical proximity (and assonance⁸⁴) drawing attention to their semantic affinities. In *Iliad* 1, for instance, escaping death is conditional upon war and plague not subduing the Achaeans (εἴ κεν θάνατόν γε φύγοιμεν, / εἰ δὴ ὁμοῦ πόλεμός τε δαμᾷ καὶ λοιμὸς Ἀχαιούς, 60-61). Here Achilles sets the theme of the opening scene of the *Iliad* on an equal par with the subject-matter of the poem. As Jouanna points out, what brings together plague and war is the effects they have on the community.⁸⁵ In addition to their similarly destructive effects, though, the clustering of plague and war paves the ground for the identification of λοιμὸς as λοιγός discussed above and for the parallelisms between Apollo and Achilles.⁸⁶ In Thucydides too, the plague destroys Athens from within the walls while the Spartans and their allies destroy the land outside the walls (ἀνθρώπων τ' ἔνδον θνησκόντων [2.54.2] καὶ γῆς ἔξω δηουμένης, 2.54.1-2). Later in book 2, Thucydides' Pericles invites his fellow-Athenians "to bear with resignation what comes from the gods and with fortitude the hardships that come from the enemy" (φέρειν δὲ χρὴ τά τε δαιμόνια ἀναγκαίως τά τε ἀπὸ τῶν πολεμίων ἀνδρείως, 2.64.2), and in book 6 Nicias speaks of the Athenians' recovery "from a great disease and war" (ἀπὸ νόσου μεγάλης καὶ πολέμου, 6.12.1), with his wording echoed by the narrator himself (ἀπὸ τῆς νόσου καὶ τοῦ ... πολέμου, 6.26.1). The two domains are not only analogous in their devastating effects. They also complement each other in their simultaneity. Although Thucydides is at pains to show that their temporal simultaneity is an accident (most evidently through his disruption of the link between plague and war as it appears in prophecies), the devastating impact of this accident is brought out through their pairing and semantic contamination.

At the other end of the spectrum, plague and war are brought together through vocabulary based not only on analogy but also on metonymic and metaphorical associations. For instance, when the Chorus of *Oedipus the King* attributes the plague to the god of war Ares, this may be unique in Greek literature, but it exploits familiar connections between plague and war that have to do with their asymmetrical power, unpredictability, onrushing speed, and association with elemental forces.⁸⁷ If in Thucydides and later literature diseases are used to explain “the morally corrosive effects” of political events, in the *Iliad* the reverse is true.⁸⁸ Apollo’s infliction of the plague is conceptualized not only through his affective agency but also through his military stealth technology. When the plague is conceptualized through divine arrows striking from afar, suddenly and destructively, should we think of this rationally as the arrows *carrying* the disease? As an analogy for a phenomenon that belongs to a different domain, with the arrows being *like* the plague in their purpose and effect?⁸⁹ Or literally as the arrows *being* the plague?⁹⁰ Whichever option we go for, Apollo’s divine archery militarizes and instrumentalizes the plague through a type of warfare commonly perceived as unorthodox and in the margins of the military techniques and moral values of the Homeric battlefield.⁹¹ The French philosopher Michel Serres may well be right that the unidirectionality, irreversibility, and invisibility of the arrow, far from marginal, exemplifies the directional atom of relation, with parasitism as the dynamics, rather than an obstacle, to the functioning of communication between different domains.⁹² In Greek thought too, the arrow’s asymmetrical power, associated with deception but also with precision hitting at a distance, is about skill and ability in ways that fourth-century philosophy found particularly useful for thinking about the concept of the target or purpose.⁹³ Homeric poetry itself might well have employed the connection between feathered arrows (ιοί / ὄϊστοί πτερόεντες) and feathered words

(ἔπεα πτερόεντα) to show “the carryover of the efficacy of these deadly arrows to the effective use of speeches for dramatic purpose.”⁹⁴ In the *Iliad*, that efficacy of flying missiles does not manifest itself as the spreading of words or as the spreading of death on the battlefield until *after* it has first been introduced as the spreading of deadly disease. Poetry, war, and communicable disease are interconnected through the non-anthropomorphic and instrumentalized agency of technics and techniques.

Allegory

Allegory may have long been met with hermeneutic suspicion and even curiosity, but it is one of the oldest hermeneutic practices, predating the emergence of textual criticism, and calling for the need to consider grammatical and lexical knowledge and the pursuit of clarity within a broader framework of signification in which meaning is rendered problematic.⁹⁵ It is precisely because of this that, like personification, allegory has been rehabilitated in poststructuralist thinking as central to all signification.⁹⁶ The kind of allegory I am interested here is that of the extended narrative type, where an attempt is made to introduce the rational and the scientific but also the moral into a text whose “literal” meaning is culturally indefensible. My focus is on the plague of the *Iliad* as read in the work *Homeric Problems*, attributed to the grammarian of the Imperial period Heraclitus,⁹⁷ in which no fewer than ten chapters are devoted to the opening book of Homer’s poem. This is the oldest surviving reading of a literary plague in Western literature and one of the oldest sustained readings of a whole passage of epic poetry, and as such it deserves inclusion in this discussion.

The development of allegorical methods of interpretation, and more specifically of the identification of Homeric deities with elements and psychological dispositions, goes as far back as the sixth century BCE, with thinkers such as Theagenes of Rhegium

and Pherecydes.⁹⁸ Whether Metrodorus of Lampsacus' allegorical reading of the Homeric gods as parts of the human body and more specifically of Apollo as the bile was related to the opening book of the *Iliad* is not certain. It is certainly plausible: the identifications of world and body have obvious connections with the philosophical system of Metrodorus' teacher, Anaxagoras, especially as "Apollo sends the plague in the *Iliad*, and Anaxagoras' school was criticised by Aristotle for making the bile the seat of acute diseases (59A105)."⁹⁹ What is more certain, however, is that, in reading Homer, Heraclitus also reads some of his early detractors. More specifically, Heraclitus defends Homer's depiction of the plague from criticisms such as those by Zoilus of Amphipolis in the fourth century BCE who, commenting on *Iliad* 1.50, found "Apollo's attack of plague upon the dogs and mules senseless and inappropriate."¹⁰⁰ The focus of such criticisms appears to have been on religious (im)piety and more specifically on Apollo's killing of "innocent Greeks (who had already approved of returning Chyrseis to the priest in return for a ransom) indiscriminately, instead of punishing the guilty Agamemnon."¹⁰¹ Such criticisms must have also been about "illogicalities" such as why Apollo's first victims are animals,¹⁰² and why he shoots his arrows from a distance. Heraclitus sets up and at the same time conceals a triangulation between Homer's text, his own reading of that text, and other readings that need to be refuted: as David Dawson puts it, "when a text is seemingly "interpreted" through allegory, "meaning" is not being extracted from the text; instead, power is being exercised via one text over other texts and the world views they represent."¹⁰³ But in refuting previous readings of *Iliad* 1, Heraclitus does not limit himself to the specifics of this or that line of Homeric text (and to the criticism they attracted). Rather, he delivers a defence of the larger episode of the plague as a description of epidemic disease fully in line with the medical orthodoxies of the Roman era that associate pestilence with vapours making the air

murky during the summer heat.¹⁰⁴ Heraclitus addresses the question of what the plague of *Iliad 1* means through a scientific and rationalistic reading of divine intervention and disease “invoking medical theory and meteorology to show that the season must have been summer, and hence the plague a natural phenomenon.”¹⁰⁵ He is not arguing that the plague is allegorical but rather that Homer’s description of Apollo’s assault against the Greeks is an allegorical description of the natural workings and effects of the plague. Such a strategy of reading the Homeric plague “rationally” may appear to go against the general thrust of this article, but the way in which it is deployed allows us to trace continuities that underlie ostensible differences.

Heraclitus defines allegory as “the trope which says one thing but signifies something other than what it says” (ὁ γὰρ ἄλλα μὲν ἀγορεύων τρόπος, ἕτερα δὲ ὧν λέγει σημαίνων, 5.2), which accords with the views of other ancient grammarians.¹⁰⁶ In Heraclitus’ narrative, the “giving of other meanings” of allegory applies to an entire narrative episode: “Because he views Homer as a writer who composed entire narrative episodes as allegories, he faces the challenge of demonstrating the overall narrative coherence of his individual allegorical readings.”¹⁰⁷ That does not exclude the application of the same principle of “giving of other names” to individual words and names. On the contrary, Heraclitus’ allegory embarks from a method of substitution which is characteristic of close (and selective) reading. Effectively, Heraclitus’ reading of the plague is based on the situating of close reading and of criticisms focused on specific lines and issues within a broader context of narrative and signification which has to do not only with religion and morality but also with medicine and rationality. His narrativizing of interpretation is based on three specific techniques: (a) the appropriation, for the purposes of defending the narrative, of methods specific to close reading, especially etymology, (b) the linking with one another of the etymological

readings of several words into a wider web of allegorical interpretation based on substitution, and (c) the interweaving of targeted allegorical interventions with “existing features of Homer’s own literal story line” that ensure the coherence of the allegorical reading.¹⁰⁸ As Dawson has shown, the interweaving of the allegorical and the literal in Heraclitus is achieved through the subjection of nouns to substitution, adjectives to etymology, and verbs to a literal reading.¹⁰⁹ Apollo is identical with the sun (ὁ αὐτὸς Ἀπόλλων ἡλίῳ, 6.6). His cult epithets are all interpreted par-etymologically in ways that support his identity as the sun: he is called Phoebus “not because of Phoebe, who is said to be Leto’s mother ... [but] because of the brightness of his rays” (7.5-7). He is called ἐκάεργος not “from Hekaerge, the woman who brought the firstfruits from the Hyperboreans to Delos ... [but] literally hekaergos, he who ‘works from afar’” (7.8-9). He is called Λυκηγενῆς “not as being born in Lycia ... but ... because he is the cause of the twilight glow” (7.10-11). And he is called χρυσάορος “not because he has a golden sword at his belt ... but... because of his rays” (7.12-13). As for verbs, the reading of Apollo as the sun is supported by maintaining the literal action of killing: “The sun gives plagues their best opportunity to be destructive” (8.1). To quote Dawson again, although “the sun does not literally cause their deaths, the sun does accompany, and create conditions favorable for, literal, physical deaths.”¹¹⁰

Allegory foregrounds the medium of language as opaque and turns the text into “a riddle to be solved” rather than “the masterwork of a craftsman to be appreciated.”¹¹¹ This is in marked contrast to the rhetoric of textual criticism which is that of the sovereign poet “unsullied by what is outside”¹¹² and which favours the transparency of the medium of language and the knowledge of diction and grammar as guarantors of lack of semantic trouble¹¹³ (based on a process of textual dissection, substitution, or excision of words and lines, and attribution of lack of clarity to the process of

redaction). What Heraclitus offers is a moralizing account of Homer's depiction of the gods and a rationalizing account of his depiction of the plague, defending the authority of the former through the power of the latter. The focus of Heraclitus' reading is not only "to salvage Homer's reputation in respect to religious piety."¹¹⁴ It is also to salvage Homer's reputation in respect to medical, scientific knowledge. To achieve that, Heraclitus' reading turns the episode of the plague into a site in which strategies of close reading, of textual purism, and of an aesthetic of clarity are brought into contact with larger issues of interpretation. What is being practiced is what might be perceived as the merging of "the study of what we would call the general meaning of texts with the study of the meaning of figures or words."¹¹⁵ Moreover, it includes the merging of the poem's form with one's own reading of that form. One could dismiss Heraclitus' approach as confusing and confused. In this section, however, I have argued that the invading of texts or reading practices by one another needs to be foregrounded and subjected to scrutiny. This is not least because, as the literary critic David Greetham has shown, the invasion of texts or reading practices by one another is in fact ubiquitous and needs to be theorized under the rubric of what he calls "the pleasures of contamination."¹¹⁶

Conclusion

Etymologically, the Greek word for metaphor, μεταφορά, "found first in this meaning in Aristotle and his contemporaries,"¹¹⁷ is about "carrying across" or transference. Being itself a metaphor, the word involves the transportation and introduction of terms into a linguistic environment to which they are alien (ὀνόματος ἀλλοτρίου ἐπιφορά, *Poetics* 1457b7).¹¹⁸ Whether metaphors move by the poet in ways that cannot be taught and communicated, as Aristotle maintains, or move by themselves, as Cicero has it,¹¹⁹

they are clearly associated with a twin process that mystifies the workings of transmission between domains while also celebrating the vividness of its effects. The aesthetic pleasure to be derived from encountering figurative language has to do with the recognition of similarities between distinct domains and with the vividness and immediacy achieved through this mediation. If contagion is to be seen in relation to narrative techniques associated with the workings and effects of metaphor and, as I have argued in this article, in relation to other techniques associated with recognition, surprise, and vividness, from metonymy to allegory, it needs to be seen in terms of transmission as something transformative: transformative not only for the words or phrases that move, in ways that cannot be taught and learned, but also for the narrative they invade and for those they move through the pleasures of surprise, recognition, and immediacy: listeners, readers, spectators.

Does the plague exist outside a usage of words and phrases whose understanding is based on analogy, comparison, and similarity, or on association and contiguity? The vocabulary of the plague can be seen as a case study for the different meanings of the word ἀλλότριος (“alien”) that Aristotle uses in the *Poetics* (21, 1457b7, 31) to articulate the function and power of metaphor: deviation, borrowing, substitution.¹²⁰ It can also be related to other processes associated with tropological language such as the saying “other than what one seems to say,” as ancient rhetorical definitions of allegory have it.¹²¹ The narratives of the *Iliad*, *Oedipus and King* and the *History of the Peloponnesian War* can be seen as building their own networks of linguistic associations and substitutions for what constitutes the plague with the help of modern discussions of contagion and language as they emerge in contemporary critical thought, conceptual metaphors as used in cognitive linguistics, and linguistic tropes as they come to be understood (and debated) in ancient rhetoric and philosophy. It is by

bringing these narratives into contact with such hermeneutic apparatuses that one can appreciate how their depiction of the plague exploits language formation as a set of operations based on the interaction between different registers and different linguistic domains associated with the sounds and meanings of words, the structure of sentences, and language as cognitive and discursive practice. The plague takes over the routes of language in the way it takes over the geographical, financial, and military routes of the Athenian empire in Thucydides or the routes of emotions and the routes of information in all three narratives explored in this article. One can push aside this language as anachronistic or ornamental, looking instead for the historical facts or literal meanings it conceals, following the paradigms of the history of medicine or of philological purism. Alternatively, one can use it in the way this article has suggested, to explore the ways in which the plague of archaic and classical Greek narrative is a constellation of such uses of language, exploiting their operations as it spreads across verbal structures of space, time, knowledge and affect.¹²²

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¹ Homer, *Iliad* 1.61; Hesiod, *Works and Days* 243; Aeschylus, *Persians* 715; *Suppliant Women* 658; Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* 28; Herodotus 6.27.1, 7.171.2, 8.115.3; Thucydides 2.47.3, 2.54.3 (x3); Plato, *Symposium* 188b1, 201d4; *Laws* 709a6, 906c5; Demosthenes 25.80; Aeschines 3.135. The word also occurs in Hippocratic writings and in fragmentary texts attributed to, or in testimonia around, Epimenides, Eupolis, Empedocles, Protagoras, Stesimbrotus, Lysias, Lycurgus, Aristotle, Demades, Theopompus, Xenocrates, Eudoxus, Heraclides Ponticus, and Theophrastus.

² Mitchell-Boyask 2008, 23-24 and 59.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all passages from Homer's *Iliad*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and Thucydides are quoted from the bilingual Loeb editions by Wyatt 1999, Lloyd-Jones 1994 and Smith 1928 respectively.

⁴ For relevant studies, see especially Gourevitch 2013, Jouanna 2012 and 2006, Mitchell-Boyask 2008, Nutton 2008 and 2000, Atkinson 1999, Leven 1993, and Grmek 1984. Further bibliography can be found in the notes below.

⁵ The story of the study of Greco-Roman contagion is one of caution against cultural contamination ("plague" is anachronistic, "pestilence" is not: Jouanna 2012, 124), against semantic false friends or partially false friends ("it is ... by no means certain that the title *epidemiai* signifies unequivocally

‘epidemic diseases’”: Langholf 1990, 78-79; “Nor did the Latin word *inficere* carry the connotations that “infection” has for us” Nutton 2000, 151), and against descriptions of medical phenomena and processes using dead, dying, or living metaphors (“always difficult to decide how far any metaphor is a dead metaphor”: Nutton 2000, 2008, and 2013, 19-36 (quote from p.26); Wujastyk and Conrad 2000.

⁶ See especially Matzner 2016 and Silk 2003 and 1974, with further bibliography.

⁷ Modern popular culture and critical thought have both been preoccupied with epidemiological vocabulary in ways that transcend the modern germ theory of disease and relate to broader and more diffuse notions of involuntary transfer through contact or proximity. The word “viral” is one of “the marketing buzzwords of the network age”: Sampson 2012. Similarly, since the 1990s “contagion” has spread across the literature of economics, computers, social psychology, literary and cultural studies, as well as mainstream media, popular fiction and film: Wald 2007, Mitchell 2012, Nixon and Servitje 2016.

⁸ The claim of the writer and artist William S. Burroughs that “language is a virus” has played a seminal role in the emergence of meme theory and in debates both in cognitive studies and media theory. But it is the linguistic turn in continental philosophy and the emergence of cognitive linguistics that provide the richest pool of ideas for thinking about language, especially figurative language, and how it can be conceptualized through the spreading of contagious disease. Gilman 2011 and Mitchell 2012 have shown that contagion and metaphor are closely woven together in much contemporary critical thought. For instance, for Jacques Derrida “metaphoricity is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic” (Derrida 1981 [1972], 1). Other critics have associated contagion with metonymy. For Jean Baudrillard, the AIDS epidemic, terrorism and computer viruses “are the indexical signs of a viral culture” (Genosko 1994, 53-54). Viral metonymy is a type of uncontrollable “dispersion by contiguity,” of a relation between original and copy “in which the copy substitutes itself for the original from which it becomes indistinguishable” (Genosko 2006, 542).

⁹ For an overview of the shifting fortunes of metaphor, see recently Worman 2015. On metonymy, see Matzner 2016. On the history of personification and allegory, see respectively Paxson 2009 and Laird 2003.

¹⁰ On the identification of the use of the word as a metaphor in this passage, see Chantraine 1968, 646 s.v. *λοιμός*; Beekes 2010, 869 s.v. *λοιμός*; Martin 2009, 186 n.174.

¹¹ Das 2015, 76-77.

¹² See recently Martin 2009, esp.168. The seminal work on this (as well as on much more related to pollution in ancient Greece) is Parker 1983.

¹³ Mitchell-Boyask 2008, 24.

¹⁴ Personification as a subcategory of metaphor: Matzner 2016, 148-49; as a master trope: De Man 1986, 48. For a range of approaches to personification in Greek literature and art, see the contributions in Stafford and Herrin 2005.

¹⁵ Paxson 2009, 172.

¹⁶ Hedley 1982, 56.

¹⁷ Paxson 2009, 21-22.

¹⁸ On the rhetoric of rhetoric as seductive ornamentation and of figuration as cosmetic concealment, see Todorov 1982, 74-75.

¹⁹ Paxson 2009, 33, describing how De Man sees the theorization of *proposopoeia*.

²⁰ Parry 1969, 114.

²¹ On *στερισκόμενοι* as passive (“being deprived of,” “losing the use of”) rather than middle (“cutting of”), see Morgan 1994, 203. The agency of the plague needs to be inferred in this instance with the help of the many active verbs that surround the phrase.

²² On the vocabulary deriving from *φθείρω*, see Bruzzone 2017, 900.

²³ Craik 2001.

²⁴ Holmes 2010, 55.

²⁵ Flower 2009, 4.

²⁶ On this passage, see Cook 1985, 23-25.

²⁷ My translation.

²⁸ Dawe 1982, 110 on Soph. *OT* 175-7.

²⁹ Furley and Bremer 2001, II 287, followed by Finglass 2018 on Soph. *OT* 190-194.

³⁰ Padel 1992, 129-32. Another force that Padel includes in this list is violent emotions. Their role in narrative constructions of the plague deserves a separate analysis that cannot be undertaken in this article.

³¹ The translation of Zenodotus’ reading is by Pulleyn 2013, 151.

³² *LfgrE*, s.v. ὄρνυμι 1αβ. See, for instance, *Iliad* 14.254, *Odyssey* 11.407, and Aeschylus’ *Persians* 496.

³³ Seymour 1891, 9 on *Iliad* 1.53.

³⁴ See *Iliad* 1.383. For the arrows as a feature of Apollo and Artemis visiting humans with sudden death, see also *Iliad* 24.759, *Odyssey* 3.280, 5.124, 11.173, 11.199, 15.411.

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- ³⁵ Pulleyn 2013, 22.
- ³⁶ Ready 2011, 11.
- ³⁷ For similes as one of the Homeric methods of presenting the theme of “The Journeys of the Gods,” see Scott 1974, 15-20.
- ³⁸ Pulleyn 2013, 138 on *Iliad* 1.47.
- ³⁹ Latacz, Nünlist, and Stoevesandt 2009, 45 on *Iliad* 1.47.
- ⁴⁰ Pulleyn 2013, 138 on *Iliad* 1.47.
- ⁴¹ On the swift assault of a god compared to the movement of night, see Clarke 1995, 311-12, followed by Holmes 2010, 49 n.27.
- ⁴² Matzner 2016.
- ⁴³ Matzner 2016, 282.
- ⁴⁴ Mitchell-Boyask 2008, 24.
- ⁴⁵ Mitchell-Boyask 2008, 59.
- ⁴⁶ On pollution and purification in the play, see most recently Meinel 2015, 46-73.
- ⁴⁷ Munson 2015, 52.
- ⁴⁸ Bloomfield 1963, 169 – used by the author in relation to personification allegory.
- ⁴⁹ On this function of the personal pronoun in English, see Lyons 1977, 655-56. On the Greek definite article marking nouns as identifiable “either as a specific entity known from the context [...] or general knowledge [...], or as an entire class,” see Van Emde Boas and Huitink 2010, 137.
- ⁵⁰ On the ‘particular article’, see Smyth 1920, §1120a-b.
- ⁵¹ Demont 1983; Thomas 2006, 102-3; Demont 2013, 75-76; Thomas 2017, 569-70.
- ⁵² Thomas 2017, 571.
- ⁵³ My translation, following Jouanna 2005, 14-15: “The compound verb ἀποκρίνω indicates that all the illnesses that had been present before the plague were subject to a crisis which transformed them into the newly arrived disease. This compound of κρίνω has the same meaning as the simple verb in the Hippocratics.”
- ⁵⁴ Hornblower 1991, 494-495 on Thuc. 3.87, with bibliography.
- ⁵⁵ Mitchell-Boyask 2008, 24.
- ⁵⁶ *On Regimen in Acute Diseases* 5 (= section 2 line 13). See also Aristotle’s τὰ λοιμώδη, “pestilential diseases,” in *Problems* VII.8 (887a28-30) and Galen’s λοιμώδης κατάστασις, “pestilential condition,” in *Difficulties in Breathing*, 2.13, with Leven 1993, 53-54.
- ⁵⁷ Owen 1857, 221. See also Connor 31 n.30 who calls it “unusual” (though I take issue with his additional claim that it is a “seemingly pleonastic expression” and also with Demont’s view in 2013, 81 that the phrasing is typical of Thucydides’ interest in variatio).
- ⁵⁸ Parry 1969, 115-16, with his translation of the phrase (adapted). On the rhetorical function of the hyperbaton in Thucydides, see Markovic 2006.
- ⁵⁹ Woodman 1988, 32.
- ⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* I.24, 1192a10–11, on which see further Fermani 2014.
- ⁶¹ For an indirect reference to the plague at line 1449, see Foley 1993, 530.
- ⁶² On the translation provided here, see Rusten 1989, 205 on 2.64.1. The relation between contagion and emotions deserves a more systematic analysis that the scope of the present article allows.
- ⁶³ See Connor 1984, 99-105 and Orwin 1988, 832, both with earlier bibliography. See also Allison 1997, esp. 66. On the disease language in Thucydides’ description of the massacre at Mykalessos (7.27-29), see Kallet 1999). On the use of medicine as a model for politics in historiography, see Brock 2013, 69-82, Brock 2000, and Jouanna 2005, 17-24.
- ⁶⁴ Padel 1992, 52-53.
- ⁶⁵ Demont 1990, 153-55. The political implications of the plague require an in-depth analysis that lies outside the scope of the present article.
- ⁶⁶ Hornblower 1991, 323 on 2.50.1: “beyond description or expectation;” Rusten 1989, 186 on 2.50.1 “beyond explanation;” Marshall 1990, 168: “beyond calculation.”
- ⁶⁷ On abstraction in Thucydides in relation to his choice of vocabulary but also in broader terms, as recognition of conceptual thought and expression, see Allison 1997, with a perceptive analysis of 2.47.3-2.54 at 65-73. On the unexpected in Thucydides, see Marshall 1990, Morrison 2006, 270, and Greenwood 2017, 170-172 with bibliography. On the relation between the particular and the general in Thucydides, see Cook 1985. On the dichotomy between the specific and the universal in relation to the actual and the invented, see Marincola 2001, 79-80.
- ⁶⁸ Harvey 2002, 90. On negative exemplarity in Thucydides, see Greenwood 2017, 165-168 and 2006, 23-24.
- ⁶⁹ On near homonymy, see Philip 1996, 69 and Coates 1968.
- ⁷⁰ Owen 1857, 221; Blickman 1987, 259.

- ⁷¹ On λοιμός and λιμός in ancient Greek literature, see Jouanna 2006 who provides an overview of how the two words are used side by side from Homer to late antiquity and Bruzzone 2017. See also Gourevitch 2013.
- ⁷² Later passages discussed in Jouanna 2006 and Gourevitch 2013.
- ⁷³ As Jouanna 2006, 200 perceptively notes, pace West 1978, 218 on Hesiod's *Works and Days* 243 and Demont 2013.
- ⁷⁴ Jouanna 2006, 202.
- ⁷⁵ Kamerbeek 1967, 38 on Soph. *OT* 27: if ἐν at line 27 is adverbial "the *loimos echthistos* has to be distinguished from the blight on the fruits etc." Knox 1957, 136 argues that lines 25-27 combine *loimos* and the traditional threefold blight.
- ⁷⁶ Bradford 1994, 29. On the fungibility of λιμός and λοιμός in this passage and the equivocation of the prophecy, see Fineman 1989, 69.
- ⁷⁷ Nagy 1976, 212-13; Blickman 1987.
- ⁷⁸ Blickman 1983, 22.
- ⁷⁹ Blickman 1987.
- ⁸⁰ Blickman 1987, 6.
- ⁸¹ Elmer 2013, 83.
- ⁸² The role of the plague of *Iliad* 1 in broader discussions around the promises and limitations of causality in the poem lies outside the scope of the current article. I intend to pursue this issue in a separate study.
- ⁸³ Gibbs 1994, 243-44.
- ⁸⁴ Lamberterie 2005, 138.
- ⁸⁵ Jouanna 2006, 199.
- ⁸⁶ Rabel 1990; Nagy 1979.
- ⁸⁷ Ares represents the most destructive and unpredictable aspects of war: consider his onrushing speed (*Iliad* 5.430; 8.215; 13.295, 328, 528, etc), roaring (*Iliad* 13.521), associations with fire and storm (*Iliad* 20.51-53, Hesiod, *Shield* 345), being stained with slaughter (*Iliad* 5.31, 455, 844; 21.402), and destruction of mortals (*Iliad* 5.31, 455, 518, 846, 908, etc). Despite the fact that the association of Ares with disease is not attested outside Sophocles, there is an additional factor that makes such an association plausible in this ode which is so preoccupied with divine protection. He is the god who, more than any other god, can be confronted and defeated by wounding or imprisoning (wounding: *Iliad* 5.835-909; 21.391-414; Hesiod, *Shield* 357-67, 424-66; overcome by bonds: *Iliad* 5.385-91; *Odyssey* 8.266-366; see further Faraone 1992, 74-78). What is noticeably absent from this ode is the pattern of divine anger and propitiation of *Iliad* 1 which could, in theory, have been deployed here in relation to Ares in view of his role in the stories around the foundation of Thebes (it is his dragon that Cadmus kills and his daughter Harmonia that Cadmus eventually marries – Gantz 1993, 468-469). For Ares in literature and cult, see Millinton 2013.
- ⁸⁸ Grmek 1993, 331. Quote from Hussey 1985, 188.
- ⁸⁹ Lloyd 1966, 206-7: "the image of darts conveys both the suddenness of the onset of the disease, and the pain it causes."
- ⁹⁰ Padel 1992, 153: "Apollo's arrows are the plague that strikes the Greek camp... Apollo can use his arrows simply to shoot, rather than as disease-bearers."
- ⁹¹ See, for instance, Graf 2009, 13-16. On Apollo's arrows in Greek thought and on the ways in which Apollo's bow, lyre and, oracles are interlinked, see Monburn 2007.
- ⁹² Serres 1982, 26-27.
- ⁹³ Sutherland 2001; Lasky 1994.
- ⁹⁴ Lasky 1994. On a discussion of the common formula "winged/feathered words" and its possible connections to feathered arrows and to winged birds, see Pulleyn 2013, 180-1 on *Iliad* 1.201, with bibliography.
- ⁹⁵ Struck 1995, 223.
- ⁹⁶ Laird 2003.
- ⁹⁷ For a date around 100 C.E. see Russell and Konstan 2005, xi-xiii.
- ⁹⁸ Russell and Konstan 2005, xiii-xiv.
- ⁹⁹ Richardson 2006, 68.
- ¹⁰⁰ Bishop 2016, 391. See also Kirk 1984, 58 and Nünlist 2012, 124-25.
- ¹⁰¹ Dawson 1992, 43.
- ¹⁰² Kirk 1984, 58 on *Iliad* 1.50: "The exegetical commentators (AbT) made some odd suggestions about why mules and dogs were the first victims: to give men due warning, since Apollo was a humanitarian god? Or because these animals are notorious sniffers and therefore likely to pick up diseases quickly - mules especially so because of their mixed nature?"
- ¹⁰³ Dawson 1992, 5.

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- ¹⁰⁴ The relevant sources are discussed in Jouanna 2012.
- ¹⁰⁵ Konstan 2011.
- ¹⁰⁶ Russell and Konstan 2005, xiii.
- ¹⁰⁷ Dawson 1992, 42.
- ¹⁰⁸ Dawson 1992, 42.
- ¹⁰⁹ Dawson 1992, 42.
- ¹¹⁰ Dawson 1992, 44.
- ¹¹¹ Struck 1995, 227.
- ¹¹² Struck 1995, 224.
- ¹¹³ Struck 1995, 224.
- ¹¹⁴ Russell and Konstan 2005, xiii.
- ¹¹⁵ Laird 2003, 172.
- ¹¹⁶ Greetham 2010.
- ¹¹⁷ Innes 2003, 7.
- ¹¹⁸ For perceptive analysis, see Lloyd 1996 and Worman 2015, 28-35, both with further bibliography.
- ¹¹⁹ Cicero, *Brutus* 274: “you would say it had not invaded into an alien place but had migrated into its own” (non irruisse in alienum locum sed migrasse in suum), on which see further Innes 2003, 7.
- ¹²⁰ On these meanings of the word in Aristotle’s discussion of metaphor, see Silk 2003.
- ¹²¹ Dawson 1992, 3 and 243 n.9.
- ¹²² I would like to thank audience members in Belfast, Bristol, and Columbia SC for generous feedback on earlier versions of this article. I am also grateful to Duncan Kennedy, David Konstan, Kostas Valakas, and Ruth Winter for helpful discussions and suggestions and to the editor and anonymous readers of *AJP* for their insightful comments.